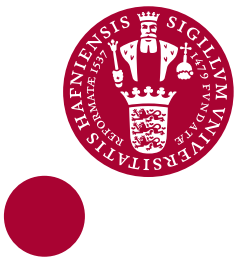

Informed Consent in the Field of Language and Sexuality

The Case of Online Dating Research

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Abstract:

In order to understand how sexual and romantic relations are established and negotiated in discourse, the field of language and sexuality is dependent upon empirical data from naturally occurring spontaneous interaction. However, detailed discussions of research methods are lacking in the field. In this article, I explore ways of accessing intimate spontaneous data in a heterosexual online dating context. Through interactional analysis of three types of online dating interaction, I examine the multi-faceted context for securing informed consent while at the same time preserving participants' intimacy. I argue that institutionalized informed consent procedures may undercut participant agency and expose symbolic violence towards their carefully built interactional framework. The analysis demonstrates participants' ability to negotiate ethical issues and to turn such issues into a contribution to the ongoing flirtatious interaction. As a result, I suggest a method that integrates participants' interactional expertise in the consent-gaining process.

Keywords: ethics, informed consent, participant agency, online dating, flirtation, intimacy

1. Collecting naturally occurring intimate data

Sexual and romantic encounters consist of a broad range of acts performed through various interactional modes such as physical touch, variation in voice quality, and use of certain emoticons. It is difficult to investigate these various modes using reported and experimental methods. Exploration of naturally occurring data from spontaneous interaction thus represents a much-needed contribution. However, accessing human subjects' romantic and sexual interaction is not a straightforward task for any researcher, as is evident from the relatively few publications based on intimate interactional data within the field of language and sexuality . Consequently, the field is dependent on a continuous discussion of ethics and methods based on researchers' nuanced experiences.

When collecting data from romantic/sexual interaction, the issue of informed consent – basically understood as a negotiation of power relations – becomes especially pertinent since sexual contexts attach erotic meaning to issues of power (Kulick 2003). As I demonstrate, one important mechanism in flirting is to play with dominant and vulnerable positions in interaction. This playful connection between power and the sexual dynamic forms blurry grounds for negotiating informed consent. Analysis, however, demonstrates that participants are capable of successfully incorporating informed consent as a resource within the flirtatious framework.

Informed consent is key to legitimizing a researcher's ethics. Yet it proves difficult to define what exactly constitutes fully informed consent. Each research situation contains complex layers of power distribution, confronting the researcher with unpredictable ethical dilemmas (Thorne 1980). Further complexities are added by

contemporary digital society, in which the researcher must navigate endless accessibility in a context in which the lines between private and public are exceptionally blurry (Hine 2013). Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor (2012) introduce 'the principle of care' as a non-institutionalized ethical standard for ethnographers. The principle is universal and requires the researcher to exercise empathy and care for her participants and ensure to the greatest extent possible to give back to the community. This principle ultimately forefronts the researcher's local knowledge and ethics instead of institutionalized standards.

In this paper, I discuss the intricate context for securing informed consent in empirical research on language and sexuality. As a field that investigates very intimate areas of people's lives, it is important to consider means of collecting informed consent in which participants' intimacy is preserved. When collecting romantic and sexual data, the researcher must provide the best possible conditions for the participant's agentive choices and be careful not to produce humiliation in the romantic interaction by imposing supercilious ethical understandings. I argue that institutionalized informed consent procedures may undercut participant agency. The approach that I assert here connects to 'the principle of care' as the valuation of participants is at the forefront of ethical considerations. Through detailed interactional analysis of consent collection in three types of online dating data, I demonstrate the advantages of implementing consent in ways that recognize participant agency and participants' interactional projects by drawing on their contextual expertise.

1.1. The challenges of informed consent

Across national borders and scientific organizations, the requirement of informed consent is a basic part of the ethical code. The concept goes back to the Nuremberg Trials, which called for voluntary and informed consent in response to the Nazi regime's horrifying medical experiments on non-consenting individuals (Robinson 2010). The Nuremberg Code (1947) was reiterated in the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) outlined by the World Medical Association, which is still considered the worldwide standard for biomedical research. In an American context, further ethical control was developed throughout the 1960s, following revelations of methods used in, among other cases, the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment (1932-1972) (e.g. Kampmeier 1974) in which diseased participants remained uninformed and untreated despite the discovery of treatment. Request for informed consent has later come to cover a broader range of research fields, including the humanities and social sciences. Converting a research ethics model for controlled experimental frameworks to such dissimilar scientific areas is not a straightforward process since these varied research traditions work with quite different methods and data types (Marshall 2003).

Federal and institutional review procedures vary largely from country to country (Hearnshaw 2004). In Denmark, where I am based, only biomedical research is subject to review by a national ethics board. Research in the humanities and social sciences is regulated by the Act on Processing of Personal Data (Act No. 429 of 31 May 2000), requiring that all registration of personally identifiable information be approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency. In comparison, the USA possesses a wide-ranging system of institutional control in which every American university possess Institutional Review Boards for all research involving human subjects (Berg,

Appelbaum, Lidz & Parker 2001).[1] A similar system has developed in the UK where a step towards more standardized review boards was taken in 2006 in the Economic and Social Research Council publication 'Framework for Research Ethics'.

According to Thorne (1980), informed consent includes three dimensions: 1) that participants are provided with knowledge about the research project, 2) that participants can decide voluntarily, and 3) that participants have the competence to make a qualified choice. Power is central to requirements of informed consent as the concept rests upon the assumption that researchers are more powerful than participants. With the reflexive turn in anthropology (e.g. Behar & Gordon 1995, Clifford & Marcus 1986), a discussion of the researcher's role was initiated, which also – led by feminist and postcolonial researchers – came to focus on asymmetrical power relations in the field: between male and female researchers, between the Westerner and the other, and between the researcher and the researched (Golde 1970, Said 1978). Further discussions on research ethics have focused on the practical and structural difficulties in applying universal consent procedures to various cultural contexts (e.g. Christakis 1992, Dorian 2010, Fluehr-Lobban 1994, IJsselmuiden & Faden 1992, Robinson 2010).

The concepts of power used in this article are inspired by the two arguably most influential scholars in this area. On an abstract level I draw on Foucault's concept of power as not being 'in the hands' of individuals or institutions, but as a 'floating' discourse governing relations between social agents (Foucault [1975] 1995 , [1976]

[1] Critique of the IRBs has been raised in an American context, highlighting a lack of understanding of ethnographic complexity caused by a one-sided biomedical focus (Plattner 2003) and overshadowing interests in protecting the institution ahead of participants in potential lawsuits (Adler & Adler 2002).

1990) . On an interactional level, I draw on Bourdieu's ([1972] 1977) concepts of symbolic capital and symbolic power as a regular base for dominance, control, and authority, i.e. power legitimized by social norms and positions, inflicted on individuals by individuals. Along these lines, Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton & Richardson (1993) argue that power relations are always situated and highly influenced by the method selected by the researcher. When engaging in participant observation, the researcher takes up various interactional positions and engages in changing relationships that all possess varying and contradictory levels of authority. The authority that the researcher is presumed to carry by force of her institutional status may well be contested by participants' local statuses as gatekeepers of the community under study.

In order to prevent counterproductive power execution, bearing in mind that power and thus potential exploitation are immanent in all human relations, the concept of informed consent attempts to create freedom of choice. Accordingly, the action of asking for informed consent aims to enable agency. While the term 'agency' carries a long history of theorization and scholarly discussion, Ahearn's basic definition serves as a starting point: 'the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn 2001: 112). With a focus on research ethics, this definition may be elaborated upon with 'the socio-culturally mediated capacity to choose or to say no.' Frank (2006) argues that the general discussion of agency has privileged resistance, resting upon a simplified binary model of submission versus resistance. The assumption that freedom and resistance are universally desired proves to be problematic when confronted with various cultural contexts (Mahmood 2005, Gagné & McGaughey 2002). Taking into consideration a complex understanding of power, human actions are not simply a matter of free will or force but rather of both means working simultaneously. Research ethics would thus

benefit from moving beyond dualistic conceptualizations of power distributions and agency. As specified by the American Anthropological Association (AAA), 'it is the quality of the consent, not the format, that is relevant' (2009:3). Ultimately, an open dialogue of research goals and more abstract issues of power and emotional involvement should be encouraged by the researcher throughout data collection and beyond (AAA 2012). Such aspects of power and affect become especially pertinent when studying sexuality – an area that contains opaque distributions of dominance and vulnerability.

1.2. Ethical challenges of ethnographic research on sexuality

Within sexuality studies, Humphreys' Tearoom study (1970) of anonymous sexual interaction among gay men stands as the paramount example of unethical practice. For two years, Humphreys took on the role of a voyeur in the so-called tearooms in the parks of St. Louis, Missouri – public restrooms in which men have anonymous sex – and observed sexual behavior. In addition, Humphreys registered the license plates of the visitors' cars, enabling him to later seek out the participants' home addresses in public registers and thus follow up his observations with a survey among the unknowing participants in their homes. The survey was untruthfully presented to be part of a study on mental health issues. Most scholars have reacted with disapproval to the applied methods (e.g. Babbie 2004, Warwick 1975), though a minority acknowledge the study's contributions to understanding sexual culture in public spaces and regard Humphreys' methods as ingenious (Nardi 1996).

When investigating sexuality, power issues are further complicated by the fact that dominance and submission, resistance and willingness are loaded with erotic connotations. Such symbolic meanings may blur the understanding of what counts as resistance and exploitation (Kulick 2003). The researcher's sexuality was kept out of methodological discussion until the 1990s – with a few exceptions (Cesara 1982, Malinowski 1967, Rabinow 1977) – when three edited volumes were published that focused specifically on the anthropologist's sexuality (Kulick & Willson 1995, Lewin & Leap 1996, Markowitz & Ashkenazi 1999). Instead of denying aspects of sexual desire, all three volumes argue for embracing such issues as an ethnographic resource. According to Kulick:

> Sexual desire in the field can call into question the boundaries of self, threaten to upset the researcher-researched relation, blur the line between professional role and personal life, and provoke questions about power, exploitation, and racism (1995:12).

Sexual dynamics between researcher and researched may have very different consequences and effects depending on local culture and community, leading to either acceptance and closer connections to participants (Goode 2002, Lunsing 1999, Newton 1993) or lack of connection and reinforcement of gendered and racialized power dynamics (Dubisch 1995, Fitzgerald 1999, Moreno 1995). The most obvious means of handling this complex situation may be to provide extensive (paternalistic) care of research subjects, through which the researcher takes precautions on behalf of the participants. However, participants may respond negatively to the researcher's attempts to safeguard participants' romantic and sexual lives since they may feel capable of managing these issues according to their own preferences and moral sense (Lunsing

1999). In such cases, it becomes evident how institutionalized informed consent – despite good intentions – easily undercuts participant agency.

Further challenges occur in the field of language and sexuality in terms of collecting and recording naturally occurring intimate interaction. A focus on naturally occurring recorded data has emerged in the field as a result of improved technology and human subjects' familiarity with media alongside scholarly acknowledgement of the many subtle verbal and embodied interactional aspects in the performance and the negotiation of sexuality. However, the field faces great empirical challenges in addressing the question of how language is used as a resource in naturally occurring sexual interaction. Most studies are based on reported interview data (e.g. Jacobs 2010, Kitzinger & Frith 1999), scripted and mediated data (e.g. Channell 1997, Hall 1995), written texts (e.g. Canakis 2010, Coupland 1996), and time-limited interaction such as speed dating data (e.g. Korobov 2011, Stokoe 2010). Accordingly, documentation and targeted analysis of spontaneous flirtatious face-to-face interaction is rare (Kiesling 2013). This lack of naturally occurring spontaneous data is suggestive of a major methodological challenge in the field. With the rise of online communication, intimate interaction is now partly carried out in spaces that are easily accessible to the researcher. However, rather than representing a simple solution to the methodological challenges, this change poses new and complicated ethical questions.

1.3. Ethics of researching sexuality online

The ethics and morality of private sexual practices relative to the public space of the Internet has become a widely discussed issue since celebrity sex tapes started

circulating on the Internet (Hillyer 2004). The web-wide sharing of private recordings raised issues of immorality and power connected to the act of sharing footage on another's sexual practice without consent. Private sexual activities have turned in to a popular genre known as 'amateur porn' (Paasonen 2010), and the Web is currently full of user-generated pornography – without the level of the human subjects' consent to share their intimate lives always being completely clear.[2]

Within language and sexuality research, publications are predominantly focusing on gay men's sexual online behavior (e.g. Bogetić 2013, Milani 2013). Few researchers have investigated intimate online interaction, presumably because of difficulties in accessing naturally occurring data (Adams-Thies 2012, Del-Teso-Craviotto 2006, 2008, Jones 2005, King 2011, 2012).

The anonymity of the Internet has enabled researchers to observe online forums without participating or revealing their identities (del-Teso-Craviotto 2006, Sanders 2005, Zimmer 2010). Other researchers have taken the approach of the human subject research model, arguing that participants are ultimately the producers of online content and must be dealt with according to the same rules and obligations as participants in offline settings (D'arcy & Young 2012, Hudson & Bruckman 2004).

[2] 'Sexting' – the activity of sending text messages including erotic talk or images – is a further example of how private sexual activities are digitalized and potentially put into wider circulation without consent from participants. The recent development of popular self-censoring apps such as SnapChat and iDelete (programs that automatically deletes messages and photos a number of seconds after the receiver has viewed them) clearly demonstrates the demand for ethical agency in intimate digital contexts.

This approach is emphasized in the Association of Internet Researchers' basic ethical principles (2012).[3]

2. Accessing intimate interactional data

In 2010, I set out to collect data from spontaneous romantic encounters. I was immediately confronted with the complications of imposing standardized ethical norms on research participants in their intimate settings. For my co-authored Master's thesis (Mortensen & Tuborgh 2009, Mortensen 2010), I collected intimate conversations by instructing participants to carry out 'selfrecordings' (Schøning & Møller 2009) of spontaneous flirtation between themselves and others at private parties. Prior to designing our project, we had undergone no ethical training since such a program was neither required nor even offered to students at our university. The greatest challenge was that of ensuring informed consent from all participants. Apart from practical complications such as controlling consent from every single participant in a party setting with numerous people coming and going, we were confronted by an unwillingness from our recording participants to inform any of their interlocutors about the research. They refused the idea of gaining consent, pointing to their own emotional involvement in the situation. They feared that their immediate relationships and chances for a romantic common future would be violated and that their own positions in the

[3] Critics of a universal application of the human research subject model argue for a textual understanding of the Internet rather than a spatial understanding that mirrors offline contexts (Bassett & O'Riordan 2002). According to this argument, certain parts of the Internet such as community magazines and walls may be considered a cultural production of texts in public circulation, which does not require the same ethical precautions as do private interactions.

interaction would change drastically. Consequently, we allowed participants to wear a hidden microphone and record whenever they wished as they attended parties.[4]

After receiving the recordings, we took ethical precautions by obscuring all identifiable information, by letting the recording participants censor intimate parts of the recordings that were potentially too intimate, and by not playing any of the recordings to an audience. By progressing in this manner, we managed to pursue our aims and work with naturally occurring flirtatious data. The data provided the rare opportunity to address a variety of issues, such as the role of language in seduction, interactional strategies for initiating or refusing sex, and issues of power and agency in sexual encounters. According to the Danish Act on Processing of Personal Data, our project should have been reported to and approved by the Data Protection Agency. However, my co-author and I were unaware of the general legislation due to our lack of ethical training. In May 2010, I published an article analyzing anonymized excerpts of the data in a volume on youth language edited by my advisor (Mortensen 2010) as well as presented the project at international conferences. Here, the results were met with great interest as well as with reluctance since the data was considered unethical due to a lack of informed consent. My research method had led me to an unfruitful situation in which I had results that could potentially contribute to important discussions of the performance of human sexuality in interaction, but these results were based on data that could understandably not be acknowledged by an international research community.

[4] This approach – unusual as it may seem – connects to a long tradition of covert research in sociology in which the researcher's hidden role is viewed as a legitimate methodology (e.g. Calvey 2008, Goffman 1961).

Confronted with other scholars' critical approach to my data, I investigated the Danish legislation and in turn retrospectively informed the Danish Data Protection Agency. Its answer was ambiguous. On the one hand, the Agency stressed that research containing information about human subjects' sexuality requires prior approval and the ensuring of consent from all participants. On the other hand, I was given permission to publish my data in research articles as long as no individuals were identifiable.

My initial experience of collecting spontaneous romantic interaction demonstrates how the current informed consent situation – including institutional variability, lack of training, and the complexity of consent in different research situations – is hindering advancement in the field. My experience makes clear the urgency of resolving some of these ethical issues through scholarly discussion. The ethical challenges of my early research have formed the foundations of my current concern with ethics in online research on language and sexuality. In the following, I will discuss different means of implementing informed consent in intimate online settings.

3. Three ethical approaches to collecting intimate data online

For my PhD research, I decided to explore the growing field of online dating based on spontaneous interactional data. This ongoing project explores how heterosexual white young adult users of online dating negotiate intimate relations in interaction and how they use language and visual resources to construct and express desire. In my data collection process, I focused on two Danish dating sites – a smaller site with approximately 50,000 users and a larger site with approximately 300,000 users. Both

sites emphasize in their codes of conduct that information from all users should be treated as private and confidential, that privacy and rights of data ownership are to be respected. Based on this, I treated the sites as private communities. Ultimately, the authors behind the profiles produced their self-presentations for a specific audience, that of the dating community, and could not be regarded as consenting to an academic audience (D'Arcy & Young 2012).

The data set consists of various data types, three of which I will discuss in this article: 1) participant observation, 2) data collected by participants, and 3) recordings of offline interaction with online content. According to Hine (2000), researchers studying computer-mediated communication need to be full participants to truly understand the nature of the online culture they are investigating. With the aim of understanding the dynamics of online dating, I created a personal profile through which I visited male users' profiles, took field notes, corresponded with multiple male users, and eventually went on offline face-to-face dates with two users. Before going on a date, I informed the men about my research and my combined private and professional interests, and in both cases, the men consented to meet me and take part in my study.

Alongside engaging in participant observation, I had a small group of active online daters consisting of eight individuals who volunteered to collect and donate correspondences. I term these 'participatory data collectors'. In these cases, the collectors worked as temporary fieldworkers and gathered informed consent autonomously during interaction. To protect the identity of the participants, I provided users with pseudonyms and anonymized all identifying information such as locations,

occupations, family relations, etc. (which is true for this article as well).[5] This was the minimum of protection I provided for all users whose data I accessed. I further implemented ethical precautions by letting the participants select which data to share, thereby creating a more agentive space for my participants.

Through conversations with users and participant observation, I was made aware that users engaged their friends in their online dating activities by showing the profiles of the people in which they had an interest to each other during face-to-face interaction. I then recorded conversations between friends who read and evaluated online dating profiles together. In research on online dating, a large number of studies have focused on self-display and self- and other-presentations in dating profiles, with only little attention being paid to the reading and consumption of dating profiles (Jones 2012). Increased use of social media has made online social contexts closely intertwined with offline contexts since most young people make daily digital appearances through which offline relations are negotiated (Jones 2004, Stæhr 2014). To capture the intertwined dimension of digital and face-to-face interaction in the process of reading online dating profiles, I recorded simultaneous spoken conversations and web movements of two pairs of female friends and one pair of male friends while jointly engaged in reading online dating sites. In this case, only the friends gave informed consent, not the owners of the profiles that were being evaluated.

[5] I have chosen not to treat participants' screen names as publishable, acknowledging that I thereby lose an important object of analysis. Screen names on the dating sites are often creative and work as one of the tools available to users in their self-presentation. However, publishing screen names does not assure full protection of participants as these are sometimes traceable on the Web (Androutsopoulos 2013).

In the following analysis, I discuss the three types of data, each of which frames different approaches to informed consent.

3.1. Consent-gaining in romantic participant observation

During the period of data collection, I logged on through my personal dating profile every day for a month and then more sporadically for the next five months. While online, I searched through male profiles and wrote field notes. Eventually, I started corresponding with various male users – some conversations were initiated by me, others by male users. Researchers have pointed out the difficulties and confusion in ensuring fully informed consent when the researcher carries more than simply the role of a researcher – for instance: the role of a wife, lover, close friend, or teacher – since such relationships facilitate contexts in which participants may tend to forget the fact that casual and intimate conversations also form part of a data set (Barton 2011, Coates 1996, Irwin 2006).

My approach was to be present as my private self but not keep my professional engagement with the medium hidden. In my profile, I had checked the relevant boxes with information on my occupation, revealing that I did research in online communication but without specifying the concrete topic. I did not typically address the topic of my research myself, but if asked, I did tell openly about my research. My general approach was to engage in e-mail conversations with users on a more private level at first and then reveal my research interests when the interaction got a little further and a potential offline face-to-face meeting was discussed. Revealing my combined interests was always a difficult point as I feared that my interlocutors would

get offended and feel exploited. However, I was surprised by my interlocutors' responses and displays of agency in the interaction. It soon became clear that participants were capable of using their agency in rather delicate ways to turn the research into an interactional vehicle contributing to their own romantic projects.

The following excerpt demonstrates how Niels manages to discuss ethics when confronted with my researcher status while using the new information as a way to flirt with me. The conversation was initiated by Niels through an e-mail sent from his dating account to mine. On this basis, a correspondence of six e-mails followed over a period of 12 days. Afterwards, Niels and I went on two dates until I decided not to continue our meetings as I did not feel ready to engage in further developing the relationship. Prior to the following excerpt, Niels had suggested that we should meet face-to-face.

Example 1

December 12, 2011 1:29pm

Author: Kristine

	Original:		Translation:
01	Jeg kunne godt være frisk på at mødes engang i næste uge.	01	I would be up for meeting sometime next week.
02	Denne uge er jeg lige på kursus i Sønderjylland	02	This week I'm just taking a course in Southern Jutland
03	Inden vi mødes, skal du dog lige vide, at jeg pt. er i gang med et forskningsprojekt i internetdating på KU og derfor nok ikke kan lade helt være med at have det med et eller andet sted i tasken.	03	Before we meet, however, you should just know that I'm currently doing a research project on online dating at KU [abbreviation for University of Copenhagen] and thus probably can't really not bring that along with me to

			some extent.
04	Det ændrer dog ikke ved, at jeg som privatperson godt kunne tænke mig at snakke videre med dig...	04	However, it doesn't change the fact that, as a private person, I'd like to keep talking to you...

December 12 2011, 3:24pm

Author: Niels

	Original:		Translation:
05	Bedre sent end aldrig.	05	Better late than never.
06	Det lyder spændende med dit forskningsprojekt.	06	It sounds exciting with your research project.
07	Jeg sætter virkelig stor pris på din ærlighed, at du ikke bare mødtes med mig og lod mig sidde der uvidende om hvad du "bruger" mig til ;)	07	I really appreciate your honesty, that you didn't just meet me and let me sit there without knowing what you're "using" me for ;)
08	Jeg stiller sgu gerne op, hvis du skal have et interview eller nogle spørgsmål besvaret, bare det bliver anonymiseret i projektet, det er klart.	08	I don't mind volunteering if you need an interview or some questions answered, if it gets anonymized in the project, of course.
09	Det er faktisk modigt af dig at fortælle mig det, synes jeg.	09	It's actually pretty brave of you to tell me, I think.
10	Nu håber jeg selvfølgelig ikke du bare klapper i som en østers og det bare er mig der sidder og udleverer mig selv...ha ha.	10	Now of course I hope you won't just be all quiet and that it'll be just me sitting there and giving myself away...ha ha.
11	Nå men, pyt anyways, det sjove ved dette medie er vel i virkeligheden også, at man ikke rigtig har noget at miste...andet end tid selvfølgelig.	11	Well but, whatever anyways, the fun thing about this medium is really also that you have nothing to lose...other than time of course.
12	Vil mægtig gerne mødes over en kop et-eller-andet, om ikke andet kan du jo fortælle	12	I'd really like to meet for a cup of something, at least, you can tell me about

	mig, hvad du der nået frem til i din forskning indtil videre (kunne jo godt bruge nogle fifs…ha ha).		what you've found in your research so far(I could use some tips…ha ha).
13	Næste uge engang er fint med mig.	13	Next week sometime is fine with me.

Information about my researcher status is delivered in one sentence (03) after two initial sentences accepting the invitation and delivering practical information relevant for setting up the meeting (01-02). The sequential order of the communicative moves immediately raises ethical questions. Mentioning the research project after assenting to Niels' invitation has implications. The encouragement of his advances towards an intimate relation obviously may impact the following negotiation of consent. This is supported by Niels' consecutive orientation to the project as a context for flirtation. Niels' decision on whether to participate in the research, thus, becomes embedded in a symbolic game of exchange. Using Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical framework it may be argued that since Niels has been given a preferred response to his invitation, he is, in virtue of social norms, obliged to give something in return, i.e. consent.

Moreover, the presentation of the research project is mitigated by use of hedges ('lige' (just), 'helt' (to some extent), 'nok' (probably)) and the metaphorical expression 'et eller andet sted i tasken' (03), which literally translates to 'somewhere in the bag'. This suggests that the research is to be viewed as a secondary thing and only provides Niels with a vague idea of how and to what extent my researcher status may influence our future date.

Considering the ideal of fully informed consent as providing the research subject with information about potential risks and harms, both the sequential order and

the mitigated nature of the research presentation can easily be criticized. It is doubtful whether Niels can be considered to possess enough information to make a competent choice as to whether to participate. On the other hand, the very open-ended description of my researcher status and how it may influence our future meeting gives Niels the opportunity to deploy his own limitations for participation rather than being forced into a conventionalized understanding of research ethics.

Turning to Niels' response, the information about my researcher status is generally encountered positively. After an introductory term that politely expresses a preference for having been made aware of the research project at an earlier state of the correspondence (05), Niels moves on to apply his own ethical code to the situation. He sets up the scenario of what he would have found unethical – and then evaluates the current situation as not being that scenario (07). He thereby uses the situation to review his own limits for ethical appropriateness. The new information of my combined interests furthermore gives him occasion to think aloud about the future meeting under these new circumstances (10). Here he places an implicit request for the meeting not to exclusively be an interview but also a date and thereby draws focus to the private and romantic aspect of the meeting. Niels does not simply manage to express his ethical opinion on the changed situation but also turns the new information and the resulting researcher-researched-relationship into something flirtatious. The expression '"bruger" mig til ;)' ("use" me for ;)) (07) indicates exploitation and suggests that Niels now views me as somebody taking advantage of him for professional reasons. However, "bruger" (use) is put in quotation marks and ended by a blinking smiley, both of which function to make the statement more playful and even potentially flirtatious. He further plays up this dynamic by jokingly positioning himself as a novice and me as a coach

(12). Through this playful orientation to the new power relation between us, Niels could be viewed as positioning himself as the vulnerable object and me as the dominant subject playing on a sexual innuendo of pleasurable dominance and exploitation. That Niels is capable of keeping the situation flirtatious could be seen as a demonstration of agency on his part. By turning our new positions into a flirtatious dynamic, he sexualizes my researcher position and thereby draws some of the professional power out of that same position.

Niels' display of agency is a reminder that research participants enter the encounter with their own interactional projects as well as their own – and maybe more relevant – ethical codes that they may be capable of applying. In this case, a more equal context for discussing ethics was made possible by the open-ended description of the research project. This does not mean that the researcher should neglect any ethical precaution, but rather that she should be aware that institutional protection also carries the risk of ignoring research participants' autonomy.

Looking back, it is clear that there might have been more correct ways of creating a situation in which Niels could give consent. I could have provided him with more information, could have addressed my research interests earlier on in our e-mail interaction, or could have been more explicit about my confused feelings regarding my mixed role as researcher and private self. Yet undertaking inductive research in general and romantic participant observation more specifically offers no straightforward overview of the consequences of the research. When informing Niels of my researcher status, I had no idea how it would actually affect our meeting.

My own romantic involvement was in some ways even an advantage in the sense that it potentially balanced out some of the authority immanent in my institutional status. By engaging my private romantic self, I simultaneously took up a vulnerable position. I wanted Niels to like me and was curious as well as nervous about how our date would turn out. Revealing my researcher identity was a difficult task and made me anxious of whether my professional career would stand in the way of private opportunities for finding a romantic partner. I found that the giving up of control, which can always be only partial, and the exploration of less predictable and opaque situations gave rise to understanding intimate interaction in a new way. By being insecure and privately invested in the data, I gained access to the emotional experience that is attached to the process of writing to a potential partner, setting up a meeting, and eventually dating. Other researchers report that active use of their sexuality in data collection gave rise to similar insights into the embodied and affective aspects of a sexual culture (Jacobs 2010, Lunsing 1999). Online dating is both an entertaining enterprise as well as a vehicle for exhaustive and intense affective experiences including joyful expectation, intimate recognition, and sad disappointment. I found that possessing lived experiences of these workings not only made me a connected interviewer and observer, but also provided me with solid ground for asking the right research questions.

3.2. Participants' negotiation of informed consent

Through the method of romantic participant observation, I was in charge of how my interlocutors were informed about the research project. In the following example, I let

my participatory data collector autonomously handle the gaining of consent and thereby gave up control. As will become clear, the interactional context does not vary considerably from the example above.

When working with participatory data collectors, I chose to let them decide the best way of collecting informed consent from their interlocutors. As these were intimate situations, and much was at risk for my data collectors with regard to their emotional investment in the online dating activities, I decided that it was important to value their senses of the most comfortable means of collecting consent. Rather than imposing institutionalized ethical standards of how and when to collect informed consent, I considered, based on my previous research experience, that my data collectors' own expertise in online dating and intimate interaction was a better parameter for ethical decisions. I thus gave my participants the choice of how to collect informed consent according to what they felt most comfortable with in each situation. The participants working as participatory data collectors may have been more interested in protecting their own interests than those of their interlocutors. They may have felt in debt towards me to ensure data and, therefore, have presented the projects in favorable ways that would lead to consent. However, the majority of my participatory data collectors did not gain consent from any of their interlocutors, which demonstrates that many participants have been presented to the research in ways that have made them comfortable not to consent.

I initially offered my participatory data collectors the option for me to do the job of collecting consent for them by getting in touch with their interlocutors during or after their interaction. None of my data collectors viewed this as an attractive offer as they wished to control the situation themselves in a more direct manner. I sent each of

the data collectors an e-mail describing the aim of the project, the types of data the project sought, how data would be handled and anonymized, my contact information, and an invitation to contact me with any type of questions. My participants used this informational e-mail to forward or copy-and-paste directly into e-mails in the process of seeking consent. This independent means of collecting informed consent resulted in a variety of approaches. The same data collector did not necessarily choose the same approach in every case but adjusted the task to the individual circumstances. Most of my data collectors, however, chose to collect consent at the end of complete correspondences. Only in three cases did they collect informed consent at the beginning of or during the conversation. This tendency indicates that before addressing the topic of consent, data collectors in this context aimed at establishing good personal relations with potential participants. A similar trend was obvious in the case between Niels and myself in the previous example. Arguing that the fieldworker acts strategically and deliberately in creating close relationship that may more easily lead to consent would be mere speculation. But, as the following example confirms, the sequential order is worth reflecting upon since the interaction prior to the negotiation of consent establishes conditions imbued with power that may influence participant's willingness to consent.

An additional important point when using participatory data collectors and conducting of online participant observation is that community members may experience this as an intrusion. Studies on attitudes towards researchers on publicly accessible mailing lists discussing sensitive and controversial topics show that researchers are in some contexts viewed as "research paparazzis" and "lurkers," threatening a safe and confidential environment (Chen, Hall & Johns 2004). The method of engaging active members in a community during data collection may be

criticized for further internalizing the "lurking" activities of the "research paparazzi." On the other hand, as I argue in this article, integrating data collection into users' ongoing activities puts the members in charge and grounds ethical decisions such as when it is appropriate to ask for an interaction to be part of data in the users' situated knowledge. King (2009) offers a fruitful approach for enabling an open space for users to question and discuss research activity. By sending out e-mails to chatroom members and designing a website with information on the research, users were offered an opportunity to interact with the researcher and discuss potentially undesirable research activity.

The following excerpt once again demonstrates the flirtatious and ambiguous circumstances under which informed consent was obtained. The collection of consent is negotiated in the beginning of a chat conversation. The chat occurred between my participatory data collector Maria and Jonas, a male user of the dating site in which Maria was then a member. This conversation was the first contact between the two members and was initiated by Maria.

Example 2

		Original:			Translation:
01	Jonas:	ja, som du kan læse er jeg ret ny i 'gamet' – du også?	01	Jonas:	yes, as you can read, I'm pretty new to the 'game' – you too?
02	Maria:	hehe nej ikke helt. Så kan godt lærer dig op. Men jeg er nok alligevel ret splittet med det, ligesom dig.	02	Maria:	haha no not really. So can train you. But I'm probably pretty torn about it anyway, like you.
03		Denne gang er jeg her som bidrager til noget forskning.	03		This time I'm here as a contributor to some research.

04	Jonas:	jo tak, lidt oplæring vil jeg værdsætte – synes det er en spøjs 'verden' herinde	04	Jonas:	yes please, I'd appreciate some training – I think it's an odd 'world' in here
05		?	05		?
06		du er her for at studere folk, ikke af egen interesse?	06		you're here to study people, not for your own interest?
07		se det er endnu mere spøjst og næsten lidt unfair ;-)	07		see that's even more odd and almost a bit unfair ;-)
08	Maria:	Hehe. Ja. Undskyld. Er her også fordi jeg gerne vil. – ikke af tvang. Tænk hvis man mødte en sød fyr..	08	Maria:	Haha. Yes. Sorry. Am also here because I want to. – not by force. Imagine if one met a sweet guy..
09	Jonas:	ja du kunne jo 'risikere' det :-)	09	Jonas:	yes you might 'risk' that :-)
10	Maria:	Det er en pige der laver en Phd i net-dating.	10	Maria:	It's a girl who does a PhD in online dating
11		Ja, netop.	11		Yes, right.
12	Jonas:	ok	12	Jonas:	okay
13	Maria:	Kan derfor ligeså godt spørge dig om du ville have noget imod at vores samtaler også var et bidrag?	13	Maria:	Can just as well ask you if you'd be against our conversations also being a contribution?
14	Jonas:	det er helt fint med mig	14	Jonas:	that's perfectly fine with me

The activity of directly asking for and giving consent is managed rather easily within two turns (13-14). However, when viewing the fuller context, it is clear that the activity is embedded in a complex flirtatious exchange initiated by Maria. The question then arises: To what is Jonas actually consenting?

The first incident of flirtation appears prior to Maria's revelation of her identity as a participatory data collector. Maria uses Jonas' question about whether she is new to online dating (01) to create a playful relation. Based on her status as an experienced user of online dating, Maria flirtatiously offers to train Jonas (02) which Jonas in turn accepts (04). She uses the Danish term 'lære dig op' (train you), a verb that is most often used in a workplace context, in which a boss or more experienced colleague trains a new employee to handle a profession. The offer and the lexical choice together invokes a power dynamic in which the more capable and experienced interactant tells the novice what to do. Maria, thus, offers to train Jonas in the task of using an online dating site, which further means to seduce potential partners and in turn to potentially seduce her. By offering to be Jonas' trainer or 'master', she creates a relationship that has potential erotic connotations. The offer furthermore works to link them together as the training would possibly be something that could go on for longer than simply the interaction here and now. Here dominance and authority is taken up and played with, contributing to a flirtatious 'feel' in the interaction. In relation to informed consent, this negotiation of dominant and subordinate positions is remarkable as negotiating power relations is ultimately what informed consent is all about. In both the case of Maria and Jonas and the case of Niels and myself, participants construct a flirtatious tension by positioning each other according to relations of power.

Similar to the previous example, the discussion of consent is integrated in an ongoing intimate exchange that arguably generates mechanisms of giving and receiving, potentially placing Jonas in an indebted position indulged to consent. Jonas initially responds to the new information by critically questioning Maria's motivation for engaging in online dating (05-06) and further assesses the situation as 'spøjst' (odd)

and ‘unfair’, indicating that he does not approve. However, the following blinking smiley smoothens out the negative assessment and thereby preserves and encourages the flirtatious atmosphere in the conversation.

The flirting is further developed as Maria, after apologizing, hints at a potential match between herself and Jonas (08). She here turns away from her personal account to a more general scenario by deploying the generic ‘man’ (generic ‘one’ or ‘you’), rather than using the first person pronoun ‘jeg’ (I). The strategy of deploying generic forms in flirtatious interaction is a tendency that is seen across more of the conversations in my data set. By changing between personal and generic forms, Maria creates a flirtatious dynamic in which she can express interest but avoid being explicit. Jonas responds to this potential scenario by bringing in the second person pronoun and thereby Maria in to the situation, but still keeping it open by leaving himself out (09). He thereby confirms a potential match between them.

On top of these instances of flirtation, Maria directly asks Jonas for his consent to participate in the research, and Jonas agrees (13-14). At this point, Jonas has only been given very limited information about the research project and potential risks and harms, and this information has been part of a flirtatious dynamic. As a result, his consent cannot be considered fully informed according to institutional standards (Thorne 1980). If this would be the complete discussion of consent, it would be easy to argue that Maria uses the flirtatious situation exploitatively to get Jonas to consent quickly to what she thinks is an interesting research project. However, Maria does not leave the negotiation at that. She continues a discussion throughout the remaining chat conversation in which she addresses the question of her motivation. Following up on this, she e-mails Jonas my written description of the research project.

Giving participants agency in intimate situations relies on an assumption that they know best when it is appropriate to bring in a request for consent. This approach allows for their personal preferences and style. At the same time, it requires the researcher to give up complete control. When letting participants collect consent, the researcher cannot fully ensure what and how much information is communicated. The researcher must also be prepared to accept a variety of approaches since the collection of consent is influenced by both personal style and the particular situation in which the interaction unfolds. Furthermore, some participants will have more agency than others, which may cause unwanted exploitation. The question arises as to whether it is unethical to give up control and responsibility as a researcher and let participants manage informed consent autonomously. This may lay out the groundwork for more manipulative ways of collecting consent in which the responsibility and care for *all* participants is sacrificed. As it is an emotionally invested person who collects consent, this person's private interactional project may overrule basic ideas of responsibility and care for the other participant. On the other hand, the emotional involvement may also add a unique sensibility to the situation. It is possible that bringing in institutional norms about consent in individual intimate situations would be more disruptive and even more unethical. The two above examples both demonstrate how standardized implementations of informed consent run the risk of exposing symbolic violence towards participants' carefully constructed intimate frameworks. Bearing in mind that collecting fully informed consent is never possible in ethnography (Barton 2011, Thorne 1980), engaging participants' own approaches may be a more fruitful means of accessing their intimate interaction. One possible way of doing this with a stronger focus on securing every participant's interests could be to have an open ethical

discussion with participatory data collectors prior to the data collection process. Such a discussion could address issues of dominance and vulnerability and potentially make data collectors more sensitive to different levels of agency in interaction.

4.3. The ethics of non-present digitally represented participants

In the two above examples, the participants demonstrated agency in their abilities to question the research situation and further turn it into a beneficial interactional circumstance. However, in the final example, not all participants take part at the same level of interaction and thus do not have the same conditions for displaying agency. When collecting data that focuses on the reading of online dating profiles and the cohesion between online and offline contexts, the researcher is immediately confronted with questions as to who counts as participants and whether various modes mean various levels of participation and thereby various rights among participants. Should evaluation of an online profile on a dating site be considered an evaluation of a publicly circulating digital text or an evaluation of a participant?

The following excerpt demonstrates the difficulties in managing the ethical codes of the human subject research model when working with combined online and offline data. The excerpt is taken from a conversation between close female friends, Louise and Stine. The women are aged 29-30 and had, at the time of the recording, an online dating profile on a large Danish dating site. The women had met at Louise's house to dine. After dinner, they sat together in front of Louise's laptop, logged on to their dating accounts, and browsed 43 male users while discussing the men's

attractiveness and potential as romantic partners. The excerpt demonstrates a negative evaluation in which both looks and profile text are commented on.

Excerpt 3

		Original:			Translation:	Screen:
01	Louise:	ej	01	Louise:	no	
02	Stine:	YYY ((brugernavn))	02	Stine:	YYY ((username))	
03	Louise:	ja o:g retardo	03	Louise:	yes a:nd retardo	
04	Stine:	han har fået et spark	04	Stine:	he got kicked	
05		af en hest	05		by a horse	
06		da han var seks år gammel	06		when he was six years old	
07		[eller sådan noget]	07		[or something like that]	
08	Louise:	[O:KAY] hvordan kan man starte med en tekst	08	Louise:	[O:KAY] how can one start with a text	
09		YYY ((citerer to sætninger fra begyndelsen af mandens profiltekst om, at han ikke møder nogle søde piger i sin hverdag))	09		YYY ((quotes two sentences from the beginning of the man's profile text in which he writes about not meeting any sweet girls in his everyday life))	
10		allerede der så ved man jo at du er			already there, one knows that you're	
11		smånederen			kind of lame	

12	Stine:	ja		Stine:	yes

In the excerpt, the two women quickly affiliate in a negative evaluation of the man's looks, initiated by Louise (01, 03) and followed up by Stine (04-07). Louise then moves on to assess the beginning of the man's profile text by quoting two sentences from the text that she finds particularly unattractive. The women's evaluation continues beyond this excerpt, constructing further negative assessments.

In this type of recording, the users who were evaluated had not been informed about the recording nor given their consent to the recording. The men did not consent to be part of my research, yet they did accept to be evaluated by other users on the dating site. In the recordings, the male users appeared exclusively through the digital texts and photos of their dating profiles. The question thus arises: How should one deal with data when a third person enters the interaction in the form of a digital representation? Must there be special ethical considerations when user profiles are recorded quoted as part of another conversation of which the profile owners are not actively a part? Choosing a textual approach to online material, the dating profiles could be viewed simply as texts that have been put out on the open Web for others to see and evaluate and thus do not apply to the human subject research model. However, participants produced these texts and are represented through them (cf. Bolander & Locher 2014). Are the online profiles to be viewed as participants in the interaction or simply material circumstances around and within the conversation, comparable to two people reading and talking about content in a magazine? Consuming online dating profiles may be compared to watching a performance (Jones 2012). In this type of

interaction, the audience directs its gaze at the performer and claims the right to evaluate the performance. This creates an asymmetrical power balance, as the performer cannot claim the same rights. Yet, as Jones argues, an online dating site is set up not just for subjects to display themselves to desiring gazes but also for subjects to communicate. The profiles thus represent ongoing communicative acts between participants. The male user in the above excerpt is communicating with the women by having made certain photos available in a certain order, by having made certain standard information available (such as height, weight, age), and by having written a certain profile text. Through the act of visiting someone's profile, the dating site will automatically send a message to the profile owner with information about the visit and a link to the visitor's personal profile. This means that the women in turn make themselves available to the man's evaluative gaze through the act of visiting his profile. The interactive situation is thus not strictly asymmetrical but rather a complex context of transmitting and evaluating representations.

The data's complex constellation of participants also creates a complex situation for representation. In any publication or presentation of the recording, all identifiable information about the men, including photos, has been strictly anonymized to assure as much protection as possible. Yet the male users who appear in the data have had no chance to influence the way in which they are represented in the data and in academic publications and presentations. The men represent themselves to the unclear addressee of the female audience on the dating site, the women then represent the men through their evaluations to one another, and I finally represent the men through the women's representation in academic analysis. With this type of data, I as a researcher have limited resources to represent the men in a non-harmful way since my

representation is shaped by the women's mostly negative and objectifying representation. Working with this data set, I ask myself if I reproduce the women's objectification in my representation. It may well be that I further some of the negative objectification of these men in my academic processing of the data, but by having a critical approach, I hope to minimize potential harm.

All research is perspectival one way or another. In this particular case, I have chosen the perspective of the reader and how the reading of profiles is carried out as a shared activity in online-offline contexts. As a result, my analysis does not focus on the men's representations *per se* but instead on the women's interpretations and evaluations of those representations in their search for a romantic partner. In this sense, the women could be regarded as more fully participating in the study. By having proceeded in this way, I hope to contribute further knowledge on an aspect of online dating that is lacking attention – while accepting the risk of not giving all participants the same rights of influencing the final academic representation of them.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed my experiences in collecting naturally occurring intimate online data through various methods. The article is not an attempt to produce a set of universal guidelines on how to conduct empirically bounded language and sexuality research. Rather, I have explored my methods and reflections with the goal of making evident the multifaceted research context of ethnographic and empiric research in the field of language and sexuality. My three methods each present their own sets of ethical challenges: *The method of romantic participant observation* creates fuzzy

boundaries between the researcher's professional and private selves and thereby creates a difficult and unclear context in which the research subject can choose whether to participate. At the same time, data shows that the research subject can be capable of agentively negotiating both research and romantic connections. The researcher's romantic involvement not only produces an ambiguous context for the concept of informed consent; it also facilitates a more vulnerable position for the researcher and thus gives access to emotional insight into the process of online dating.

The method of participatory data collectors is an attempt to value and make use of participants' own intimate knowledge. By letting participants independently collect data and negotiate informed consent, the researcher avoids interrupting the intimate situation with conventionalized ideas of how and when consent should be collected. Giving participants the freedom to negotiate informed consent in their own ways ultimately gave me access to intimate data that I would not otherwise have been able to access. Loosening control at the same time runs the risk of giving certain more agentive participants a superior position from which they may potentially exploit others in favor of personal agendas. Being unable to care equally for all participants is a great risk to run, and as I have discussed, there may be improved ways of working with participatory data collectors by training them in research ethics prior to the collection process.

The method of offline data with online content raised a fundamental ethical issue of who to consider a participant when some participants' appear purely through digital representations. This situation is not unique to online dating since communication with and about people represented on various digital platforms is steadily increasing with the popularity of social media. In my approach, I did not seek

informed consent from the owners of the dating profiles that appeared in the recording. In this sense, I did not view them as participants to the same degree as the two participants having the conversation about them. To me, there is no clear answer as to how to view these digitally represented participants. I did try to protect the profile owners by anonymizing all identifiable information. However, the data creates a complex context for representation in which I am limited to producing a third-hand-removed representation that can only be based on the women's negative and objectifying evaluations.

Overall, I have suggested an open approach that creates an agentive space for participants by allowing the inclusion of their interactional expertise and ethical codes. I have argued that institutional standards for gaining consent may risk disrupting participants' carefully constructed intimate frameworks. My data has demonstrated how participants are perfectly capable of integrating discussions of research-related power issues into their ongoing romantic interactions. In the attempts to access spontaneous intimate interaction, it is thus worth incorporating participants' personal ethical approaches, acknowledging their fine-tuned skills for preserving intimacy. Such an approach potentially nourishes exploitative behavior but may also be a more respectful means of accessing the intimate lives of research subjects. The method of accessing participants' intimate lives will vary according to context, and researchers may have different experiences with the same approaches. All too often, method-oriented discussions are left out of scholarly articles and presentations in the rush to reach the results. Yet these discussions are necessary for developing the field and further improving empirically based understandings of language in intimate interaction. It would be impossible to conclude this article with a standard suggestion of how to

ethically collect data on intimate material. Instead, I hope that these reflections will form part of an ongoing discussion of methods in the field of language and sexuality.

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